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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WLAWRENCE)

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ETRD](#) [SY](#) [IR](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA ADVERTISES GOOD TIES WITH IRAN, SYRIA

REF: A. TUNIS 435

[1](#)B. TUNIS 141

[1](#)C. 05 TUNIS 2433

Classified By: Charg d'Affaires, a.i., David Ballard; Reasons 1.4 (b);  
(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Through its mostly-government controlled press, Tunisian officials are playing up positive economic and cultural exchanges between Tunisia and officials in Iran and Syria. Two visits to Tunis within a week--Iranian Vice President for Tourism and Heritage on April 15, and Syrian Prime Minister al-Otri on April 20-21--were covered extensively in both Arabic and French language press. Examined in detail, neither visit broke new ground (although Syrians reportedly agreed to a new convention on penal codes and the extradition of criminals, which could be linked to Tunisians arrested in Syria on their way to support the Iraq insurgency); the press play is more likely designed to show some official loyalty to these two Muslim nations under fire from the West, and keep options open, especially with Iran, should the GOT need its favor in the future. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The latest public mention of Tunisian-Iranian ties came during the April 15 visit of Iranian Vice President for Tourism and Heritage Isqandar Rahim, whose stop in Tunis was widely covered by Arab and French-language press. Rahim did not meet with Tunisian President Ben Ali (he was received by the Prime Minister), but he gave one-on-one interviews with two Tunisian publications, one the Arabic daily Ash-Shourouq and the bi-lingual weekly magazine Observateur, the latter titled with a quote from Rahim: "Iran today cannot be threatened." Indeed, out of 10 questions posed by the interviewer, nine concerned Iran's current nuclear standoff; only one addressed future tourism between the two countries.

[1](#)3. (C) Press reports call Rahim's visit the latest in a series of visits by senior Iranian envoys from the Ministry of Communication, Justice, and the Central Bank and talk about the long-standing friendship between Tunisia and Iran (Ref B). (NB: In fact, Tunisia had almost no relationship with post-revolutionary Iran until the late 80s, when President Ben Ali, presumably for tactical reasons, initiated a rapprochement.)

[1](#)4. (SBU) Media portrayed Rahim's visit as aimed at strengthening tourism and cultural relations through future bilateral tourism exhibitions, mutual tourism and cultural weeks later in 2006, increased cooperation on holistic medical treatments, as well as increasing tourism figures through potential direct flights.

[1](#)5. (C) Similarly, Syrian Prime Minister al-Otri's April 21-22 visit and meeting with President Ben Ali was detailed throughout the local press. Part of a pre-scheduled round of the Tunisian-Syrian Joint High Commission, the visit resulted

in the usual cooperative accords in trade, education, and social issues; of some interest was a reported agreement on the extradition of criminals, likely linked to the return of Tunisian nationals arrested in Syria en route to support the insurgency in Iraq. Press articles quoted Minister of Communications and Parliamentary Relations Dkhil praising the "unity of the brotherly people of Syria and Tunisia," and the intent of both Presidents Ben Ali and al-Asad to move the relationship to "higher levels."

¶6. (C) In a related story, independent Tunisian journalist Rachid Hachana published an article in the April 24 edition of al-Hayat about the recently concluded US-Tunisia Joint Military Commission (JMC) talks in Washington with the subtitle "Washington concerns about Tunisia becoming closer to Iran and Syria." Hachana quotes "American sources," but when reached by phone admitted that this referred to a variety of American friends, in the U.S. and abroad, who were speculating on Washington's reaction.

¶7. (C) Comment: The GOT is publicly waving this interesting, but not overly-significant, strengthening of ties with Iran and Syria for the predictable reasons: to show loyalty to Muslim nations under pressure from the West and to remind anyone watching that Tunisia has economic and political options outside Europe and the U.S. It is also likely that the GOT sees it as advantageous to develop some credit with Iran, so that Tunisia is in a position to call in the favor--perhaps in the form of cheap energy--at a later time. (Tunisia, a net importer of its energy needs, has been hard hit by oil price hikes. Refs A and C.)  
BALLARD